Agent of Change
The Matewan Story

Michael Creasey

As early as the 1870s, promoters began boosting the natural resources of land throughout southern West Virginia. Millions of acres of land, timber, and mineral rights passed out of the hands of local people and into the grasp of speculators who in turn sold them to absentee corporations.

Agent of Change[1]

The coming of the railroads was nearly as dramatic a development as the transfer of land to private corporations. In a relatively short period of time railroads financed by Wall Street and Fleet Street laid down an intricate web of tracks opening the way to exploitation of the natural resources.

In 1886, the Norfolk and Western Railroad announced an east-west line through southern West Virginia. Timber companies succeeded in denuding the mountainsides, and the coal companies filled the landscape with gob piles and finished the process of transforming the countryside beyond the recognition of former mountain dwellers. The Williamson Coalfield, comprised of Mingo, and parts of McDowell and Wayne counties, was opened shortly after the completion of the N&W mainline along the Tug Fork. The first coal mining operations were located around Matewan. By 1900, Mercer, McDowell, and Mingo counties alone produced almost as much coal as the rest of the entire state had in 1890. Over the next 20 years coal production in the southern counties continued to expand.

Too Many Mines and Too Many Miners [2]

The West Virginia coal fields were brought into production at a time when the established northern fields already were adequately supplying the national demand. Thus, from the outset, southern West Virginia producers were faced with stiff competition from the established coalfields. Consequently, in order to compete in distant markets, West Virginia producers had to keep their production costs well below those prevailing in the northern fields. By holding back wages, West Virginia operators were able to maintain their competitive edge.

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The Matewan area, located on the Tug Fork of the Big Sandy River in Mingo County, WV, is referred to as "a peaceful place with a violent history." Its topography consisting of sharply rising mountains rearing up from twisting creeks and narrow valleys existed for generations as a region apart from the industrialized east coast, isolated physically and culturally by the impenetrable terrain. The Tug Valley remained largely unchanged until the Industrial Revolution demanded coal to fuel the nation's industries. The influx of outsiders and exploitation of the resources dramatically changed the physical and socioeconomic makeup of the region. Today, these regions of Appalachia have been described as, "rich yet poor, exploited yet underdeveloped, scarred yet beautiful." [1]

Matewan has nurtured a distinctive folklore and has intrigued visitors over the past century. In the 1880s, the feud between the Hatfields and McCoys raged near Matewan. Forty years later, the town was the scene of the "Matewan Massacre," a bloody conflict in the West Virginia Coal Mine Wars. Historical events, the rugged terrain, and its people have shaped the unique contemporary character of the Matewan area.

In 1991, the National Park Service and the Matewan community developed a community-based plan that sets forth an agenda for accomplishing specific goals and a means to stimulate wider recognition and appreciation of Matewan's heritage. The plan, *Matewan: A Time of Change,* laid out a series of interconnected public and private actions where wisely placed public investment would, in turn, spark private sector development. The Matewan Development Center itself is a success story—a town of 800 people has worked to gain commitments from the Matewan National Bank and three coal companies to support the Center and a full-time director. Other partnerships that have formed include grants from the Humanities Foundation of West Virginia and various foundations to publish interpretive materials, collect and transcribe oral histories, architectural studies of buildings and sites related to the Matewan Massacre, a grant from the West Virginia Housing Development Fund and the Claude Worthington Benedum Foundation to restore the G.W. Hatfield Building for Section 8 low-income housing units and small businesses, a grant from the state for facade restorations within the historic district, a federal appropriation through the National Park Service to develop an interpretive plan for Matewan, a community restoration and development plan (in conjunction with Virginia Polytechnic Institute), work with the Army Corps of Engineers and communities along the Tug Fork to develop a greenways plan in concert with the Corps floodwall project, and document sites and resources associated with the Hatfield and McCoy Feud sites and the Matewan Massacre.

The accompanying article represents a continuing effort by the NPS to tell the story of the history of the American worker in its full diversity. This is a history of the common man, his labor, his life and culture. While entrepreneurs and industrialists provided the ideas and capital that fueled the American Industrial Revolution, it was American workers of different races and of many nationalities and religions, coming together, that created the modern industrial state. Both the Blair Mountain site and the town of Matewan are now under study for possible designation as National Historic Landmarks within the context of the *Labor History Theme Study*.

Specific questions concerning suggested sites for study within the context of the *Labor History Theme Study* should be addressed to Dr. James R. Grossman, The Newberry Library, 60 West Walton Street, Chicago, IL 60610-3380.

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[1] Lewis, Ron L., Excerpts from *Matewan: A Time of Change,* National Park Service, Mid-Atlantic Region, Philadelphia, PA, 1990.

(***Creasey**—continued from page 13)*

After the northern fields were organized by the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) in 1902, the northern operators were forced to pay union scale or face a strike. Thus, West Virginia operators strove diligently to keep the UMWA out of its mines in order to insure a lower wage structure. This, above all else, is what the coal operators strove to do in the 1900 to 1930 period. This strategy enabled West Virginia operators to steal the markets of northern, union producers during strikes.

The UMWA, with its base of strength in the coal fields of northern West Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Colorado, realized that it was threatened with extinction if the non-union mines of southern West Virginia continued to outproduce and dominate the coal markets. Therefore, the UMWA concentrated on organizing southern West Virginia. It is no surprise, then, that West Virginia became the battlefield in the 1910s and 1920s. Throughout the "Mine Wars," the bastion of non-union strength was in Logan, McDowell, Mingo and Mercer counties, which remained unorganized until 1933 when the passage of the National Recovery Act enabled unionization.

The UMWA's role in southern West Virginia is one of the most memorable chapters in the development of industrial unionism in the nation. It included colorful figures including a martyred folk hero, Sid Hatfield, and Mary Harris "Mother" Jones, John L. Lewis, William Blizzard, Fred Mooney, Frank Keeney, and Van Bittner. There were dramatic confrontations, such as the Paint Creek-Cabin Creek strike in 1912-13, the aborted Armed March of 1919, the Battle of Tug Fork and the Matewan Massacre in 1920, and the Battle of Blair Mountain in 1921.

West Virginia Coal Mine Wars [3]

John L. Lewis, the bushy-browed new president of the United Mine Workers of America came to Bluefield, WV on January 30, 1920, to announce the union would launch a campaign to organize coal miners in the southern Appalachians. Lewis knew coal operators would resist to the bitter end, but that didn't matter. The miners wanted to organize; the UMWA had to have their memberships; "now is the logical time for this to work and the campaign will be pushed through to a finish."

The drive had begun. It quickly grew. The organizing campaign quickly became bitter. The coal operators resisted as strongly as expected; when a miner joined the union, he was immediately fired from his job. If he lived in a company-owned home—as most did— he was told to move out. If he didn't move out, gun-bearing Baldwin-Felts "detectives" evicted him and his family, setting his furniture out on the road. Despite that kind of opposition, miners by the hundreds along the Tug Fork River joined the union. By May 15, 1920, 3,000 Tug Fork miners had joined.

Nowhere was union activity greater that spring than in Matewan. There, the police chief, Sid Hatfield, a former miner, and Mayor C. C. Testerman openly cooperated with the drive and protected the miners as they held organizing meetings in the town.

Despite efforts by Hatfield to keep the Baldwin-Felts detectives away from Matewan, they came anyway and continued the evictions. Then, on May 19, 1920, 13 Baldwin-Felts detectives—headed by Al and Lee Felts, two of the three brothers who managed the agency—came to Matewan to evict miners and their families from their homes in the Stone Mountain Mine camp.

Nothing angered miners more than "thugs" forcing women and little children from their homes at gunpoint. Word of the evictions spread like wildfire. Angry miners from Matewan and the surrounding area grabbed guns and rushed to the town as the detectives evicted six more families in dismal rainy weather. Hatfield led a group of miners to the Stone Mountain camp and tried to stop the evictions, but the Felts brothers refused his plea. When the detectives returned to Matewan that afternoon, having finished their jobs, Hatfield, surrounded by armed miners, tried to arrest Al Felts for conducting the evictions without proper Matewan authority. As he and Mayor Testerman glared at Al Felts and the other detectives outside the railroad depot, someone fired a shot, and the battle was on.

It lasted about a minute, but hundreds of shots were fired. Al Felts and Testerman fell in the first volley. When it was over, seven detectives, including both Al and Lee Felts, Mayor Testerman and two miners were dead or dying.

The battle made Sid Hatfield a folk hero for miners throughout the nation. Fifteen months later, the Baldwin-Felts detectives retaliated by killing Sid Hatfield on the courthouse steps at Welch, in a murder so brutal that it touched off an armed rebellion of 10,000 West Virginia coal miners in the largest insurrection this country has had since the Civil War.

Matewan is now being considered for designation as a National Historic Landmark by the *Labor History National Historic Landmark Theme Study*. Through the preservation of Matewan and the interpretation of this story to the American people, the National Park Service, in cooperation with the Newberry Library and the many interested citizen groups of Matewan, will insure that Matewan will continue to teach the American people about the important issues and events that working men and women have faced throughout our history.

Notes

1 Matewan Task Force and the National Park Service, *Matewan: A Time of Change.* NPS Mid-Atlantic Region, Philadelphia, PA, 1990.

2 Workman, Michael E., excerpts from *A Coal Mining Heritage Study: Southern West Virginia,* NPS Mid-Atlantic Region, Philadelphia, PA, 1991.

3 Savage, Lon K., excerpts from *Matewan: A Time of Change,* National Park Service, Mid-Atlantic Region, Philadelphia, PA, 1990.

Michael Creasey worked in the NPS Mid-Atlantic Region as a planner in the Branch of Park Planning and Special Studies. He has worked extensively with Appalachian communities and governments, primarily in West Virginia and Kentucky. He recently joined the Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance Program in the NPS Southwest Region in Santa Fe, NM.